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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001985

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/HARDING

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TAGS: [OVIP](#) [PARM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [FR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: A/S WELCH WARNS BERRI TO HOLD ELECTION

Classified By: Charge d'Affairs William Grant for Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) In a December 19 meeting with Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch and Deputy Advisor to the President and National Security Advisor (DAPNSA) for Global Democracy Strategy Elliot Abrams discussed the continuing impasse on the presidential election.

¶2. (C) Berri complained throughout the meeting that the problem was March 14 did not view him and his March 8 allies as a partner in the political process, which he translated as meaning March 14 would not accept March 8 having a one-third blocking minority vote in the cabinet. If March 14 did not want March 8 as a partner, the opposition would be willing to vote for Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman, but would remain outside the next cabinet. Berri stressed Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's importance in the negotiation process, due to his popularity and position as leader of the largest Christian party in parliament. A/S Welch warned Berri that his reputation as Speaker was at stake if the impasse continued. End Summary.

PARTNER OR NO PARTNER

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¶3. (C) Visiting NEA A/S David Welch and DAPNSA Elliot Abrams met with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri at his office in Ain el-Tineh on December 19. Charge Bill Grant, Pol/Econ Chief, and Poloff also attended the meeting. Berri began by complaining about the statement to the media Welch had given the day before, which called on the speaker to fulfill his responsibility to open the parliament so that it could choose a president. Berri claimed he had been working to that end and noted that in the past the majority and the opposition had been able to work together as partners, but not now. He warned that if they failed to elect a president before the December 31 end of the current legislative session, Lebanon would enter a "dangerous period."

¶4. (C) Berri said that in his discussions with Hariri, the two had agreed on two of the three principles supported by Berri: the election of Sleiman as president, and the adoption

of a just and equitable electoral law "similar" to the "qada" (small district) system. However, Hariri did not agree with Berri's interpretation of the makeup of a national unity cabinet. In Berri's view, Hariri's rejection of the majority/minority 17/13 seat distribution displayed a lack of trust in Berri and his initiative.

¶5. (C) Berri said his proposed distribution of cabinet seats is fair, given the 55 percent/45 percent distribution of seats in the parliament. (Note: The majority has 68 seats and the minority has 59 seats in the parliament, which Berri argues should translate into 17 and 13 cabinet seats, respectively, although there is no rule mandating that the cabinet distribution reflect representation in parliament. End Note.) He said that if March 14 wants to rule like a traditional majority does, with no opposition members, then it could pursue this path. In Berri's view, "this is okay, just do not ask me to be your partner."

¶6. (C) Berri added that if March 14 wants March 8 as a partner in the political process, then March 14 should give the opposition more rights and make this desire clear and unambiguous. Berri said that on A/S Welch's last visit, he asked the A/S Welch for help with convincing the majority to accept the national unity government, but that now he wanted the A/S Welch to ask March 14 if they truly want March 8 as a partner or not. If not, March 14 should be clear about it.

#### BLOCKING ONE-THIRD MINORITY THE KEY FOR MARCH 8

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¶7. (C) Berri explained that March 8 translates "partnership" into having a one-third blocking minority vote in the

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cabinet; otherwise, the opposition has no voice. Welch asked why the option recently suggested by Saad Hariri was unacceptable. (Note: Hariri has mentioned in recent days that out of the 30 cabinet seats, March 14 should be allotted 14 seats, March 8 be allotted 10 seats, and Sleiman be given 6 seats to serve as an independent swing vote. End Note.) He said that such a scenario would deny both March 14 its two-thirds majority and March 8 its one-third blocking minority.

¶8. (C) Berri replied that March 8 had the right to 13 seats and that he told Hariri he would be willing to take 2 seats away from the opposition, leaving it 11 seats, and would take 3 seats from the majority, leaving it with 14 seats and give the 5 seats to the president. He said Hariri rejected this idea because it still left March 8 with a blocking one-third (Note: In a later meeting, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora highlighted that fact that an 11 seat blocking minority is also a toppling minority that gives the opposition the ability to not only block initiatives but bring down the government at will. End Note.)

¶9. (C) According to Berri, March 8 needs the one-third blocking minority ability for two reasons: March 14 will always have the majority of seats in the cabinet and March 14 has the prime minister's seat, giving it the ability to block any piece of legislation. He pointed out that under Lebanon's system of government, the cabinet cannot override a prime minister's veto. He reiterated his belief that March 8 should have some mechanism to have its voice heard in the next cabinet. Berri mentioned to Hariri that in any future cabinet make-up, he would ensure that the his Amal party members would work closely with the president. According to Berri, Hariri rejected this offer, as well.

¶10. (C) Welch asked Berri how he would address March 14 concerns that a blocking minority would prevent March 14 from making any decisions opposed by Hizballah and Syria, such as cabinet positions, positions in the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), etc. Berri claimed that the appropriation of

ministries and institutions such as the LAF, had never been discussed in previous meetings and angrily asserting that newspaper reports to the contrary were "all lies"

¶11. (C) A/S Welch pushed back, asking Berri how he would address this reasonable concern of March 14. Berri avoided answering the question. He told A/S Welch to ask his "best friend" Siniora how things had gone in the first year of the Siniora cabinet when every cabinet vote had been a unanimous decision, until the issue of the Special Tribunal came up changed things. A/S Welch noted that the minority bloc had responded to the first real challenge in the cabinet by resigning en masse.

MARCH 8 WILL VOTE FOR SLEIMAN,  
BUT REFUSES TO JOIN CABINET  
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¶12. (C) Berri said that if the majority rejects March 8 as "a partner", i.e., refuses to give it the one-third blocking minority, he would propose to the opposition that they vote to elect Sleiman as president, because he is the "consensus" candidate and a presidential vacuum cannot continue into next year. However, March 8 would refuse to participate in the new cabinet and would assume the role of a traditional opposition coalition and battle March 14 for the votes of the electorate. This would drag Lebanon into another stagnate political situation.

BERRI'S REPUTATION AT STAKE  
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¶13. (C) Welch noted that Berri was first and foremost the Speaker of Parliament and secondly a member of the opposition. As Speaker, Welch said, Berri holds an important and respected role. However, he emphasized to Berri that his reputation was at risk if the current crisis continued.

¶14. (C) Berri complained about Welch's statements to the media as proof that the U.S. had said negative things about him. A/S Welch countered that his comments only pointed to the fact that March 14, like most majorities in any

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legislative body, has the right to govern freely and make decisions in the legislature. A/S Welch strongly reiterated his message that Berri would be held responsible if there were further delays in the election.

¶15. (C) Welch said that the purpose of his visit was to see if he could be of assistance to March 14, as well as Berri, to help find a solution to the continuing political crisis. His purpose was not to propose names for the presidency or to offer alternative ways to reach a consensus. Berri then lamented that he had not worked or fulfilled his normal role and duties as Speaker in more than one year. He added that he had fulfilled the duties of former President Emile Lahoud, more so than his own, by traveling around the Arab world in order to get support on solving the crisis.

AOUN CANNOT BE IGNORED  
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¶16. (C) Berri said "all Lebanese are now behind Michel Sleiman," but Aoun had the right to be president because the strongest representative of the Shia held the Speaker's position, the strongest of the Sunni would hold the prime minister's seat (referring to Saad Hariri), and under this logic, Michel Aoun, the leader of the Christian party with the largest number of seats in parliament, should be President. He noted that the largest party in parliament is Saad Hariri's Future Party, followed by Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, then Berri's Amal party, then Hizballah. He added that Aoun's party controlled 20 of the 64 seats allotted to Christians; therefore, Aoun could not just be cut out of the negotiations.

¶17. (C) Berri also thought that A/S Welch's visit to Lebanon on December 15 and 16 was a "snub" to Aoun, highlighting the fact that A/S Welch is perceived to have purposely avoided a meeting with Aoun, because A/S Welch visited Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, but not Aoun. In Berri's view, the majority of Christians are with Aoun, and in the future Sleiman would be the only man able to challenge Aoun's popularity. He noted that many Christians left Aoun's party after he signed his pact with Hizballah, but these Christians did not cross over and join Geagea's party, because the Christians know that Geagea is a "criminal."

¶18. (C) A/S Welch stated that "Aoun is a problem," adding maybe it is Aoun's ambition or the support he receives from outsiders that persuades him to act as irrationally as he does. A/S Welch continued that most politicians can be reasoned with if there is a disagreement between two parties, and that a solution can ultimately be reached, but that such a scenario was impossible with Aoun. "How do you deal with Aoun?" he asked Berri. Berri said that the key was for A/S Welch to visit Aoun. Berri continued that isolating Aoun "would be like leaving a cat alone in a room by itself." DAPNSA Abrams replied that nothing comes out of a Aoun visit. A/S Welch said that he would not meet with Aoun, but that Ambassador Feltman would upon his return. A/S Welch added that Berri was a skilled politician, and that he should leave Aoun behind.

¶19. (C) Berri lamented that he could not leave Aoun behind because Aoun is an ally of Hizballah, and Hizballah will only deal with March 14 through its interlocutor, Aoun. He said that March 8 decided to make Aoun its negotiator to give him the ability to take credit for a possible solution. He confided to A/S Welch that he knows Aoun is irrational. Berri also noted his personal dislike of Aoun, saying Aoun was not his ally but an ally of Hizballah. He highlighted the fact that Aoun voted against him for the speaker's position and tried to convince other Christians in parliament to do the same (Note: Berri also revealed that Aoun admitted to him that his insistence on a two-year mandate for Sleiman was only a bargaining chip to secure other concessions. End Note.) He told A/S Welch that he reached out to Ambassador Feltman for help on dealing with Aoun and that if A/S Welch talked with Aoun, he would feel more accepted and less like an outsider.

¶20. (C) A/S Welch reiterated his belief that Aoun would not lead March 8 anywhere. Berri then asked A/S Welch to ask Hariri to speak to Aoun, which A/S Welch said he do. A/S

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Welch noted that if Berri really wanted to move things along, he would use his influence over Hizballah to influence Aoun, who is a "nobody" without Hizballah's support. Berri said he held no such influence over Hizballah and that Aoun's power comes from his own popularity amongst the Christians,

#### FRENCH EFFORTS

¶21. (C) Lastly, Berri asked A/S Welch about the Paris donors' meeting for the Palestinian Authority (PA) and inquired whether or not France would be in contact with Syria in order to find a solution to the current political crisis. A/S Welch said that the French did not think they could succeed working with the Syrians any longer. A/S Welch added that the French were very disappointed with the results of their efforts, referring to the now dead French initiative. A/S Welch noted that French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner was very disappointed at the outcome and that he personally blamed Syria.

¶22. (U) A/S Welch has not cleared this cable.  
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